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## Meals on wheels

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# Meals on wheels

All around the world, food trucks are revolutionising the dining industry as well as becoming design attractions in their own right. We explore the phenomenon, as well as the entrepreneurs and designers who are redefining the term 'moveable feast'



**T**he gourmet food truck movement began, like so many dining trends have done, in the USA. Primarily it was formed in densely populated cities like Los Angeles and New York, where the idea of walking just across the street to a mobile unit that cooked up and sold grass-fed beef burgers and organic salted caramel ice cream was an alluring one. But it wasn't long before there were trucks knocking up hot dogs and burgers right across the States, with cities like Austin, Texas, and Portland, Oregon, also leading the way. However, over the past few years the food truck phenomenon has become a global one, highlighted by the fact that Hong Kong just enjoyed its first-ever food truck festival in May.

Still, operating a food truck has to essentially be thought of as driving a mobile kitchen, with all the safety and logistical issues that this enterprise entails. The interior design is an exercise in economies of scale: taking orders, prepping, cooking, serving and handling transactions. All of this has to happen in a space that is about 180 inches long (about the length of the windows through which customers are served), about 85 inches wide and rarely more than about 90 inches high. The interior formats are virtually unchanging, irrespective of the kind of food being served: there needs to be a powerful exhaust system,

adequate plumbing for the sinks, a water pump and water tank, sliding glass service windows with screens and slip-proof aluminium tread flooring. Those buying a truck from new can work with custom food truck outfitters to specify the amount of space given to prep areas, fridges and griddles, depending on the food type they plan to sell, or pick from a selection of previously used designs recommended to them.

The 'experience' of dining at a food truck is an all-encompassing one, so the design of the vehicle needs to be treated as a serious branding exercise. That includes making the truck as 'visible' as possible and making sure the design elements are consistent with the food packaging, the menus and any uniforms or sales motifs. To many designers, this proves to be an interesting exploration. "This is a lot of fun to work on from a design perspective," says Stanley Wong, a well-known creative director and artist who has worked in all disciplines, from art to advertising, "because there's a limitation on technical and visual space, but the finished product is highly visible. I would suggest that anyone who takes on such a project should take on a 'why not?' approach and not limit themselves."

Regarding the subject of fitting out a food truck, Scarlett Yen, owner and founder of Asian-Chinese fusion cuisine

specialists Phantom Food Truck in LA, says: "There can only be a few types of format and design." Yen, who is most likely the only food truck operator in the American city who's originally from Hong Kong, acquired her truck, like many operators do, already equipped and ready to go. "Most of the food trucks have standard equipment inside," she says. "Space is limited and all equipment has to be built according to rules."

In terms of visual appeal, the exterior design of a food truck is where the fun comes from as there's far more flexibility on the outside. "A well-designed food truck is a total experience, although there is no inner space to physically involve customers," says Wong. The very nature of the culture, in fact, is inherently fun. Diners line up at the window to order from a menu that's invariably scrawled on the window itself or on a propped-up blackboard, or even written on the side of the vehicle. They eat on the street or in their car, or they find a nearby park. They've either followed the truck to its location (thanks to social media, the whereabouts of your favourite food truck is easy to track) or just happen to be passing. Given the nature of the business, there's typically a level of spontaneity involved.

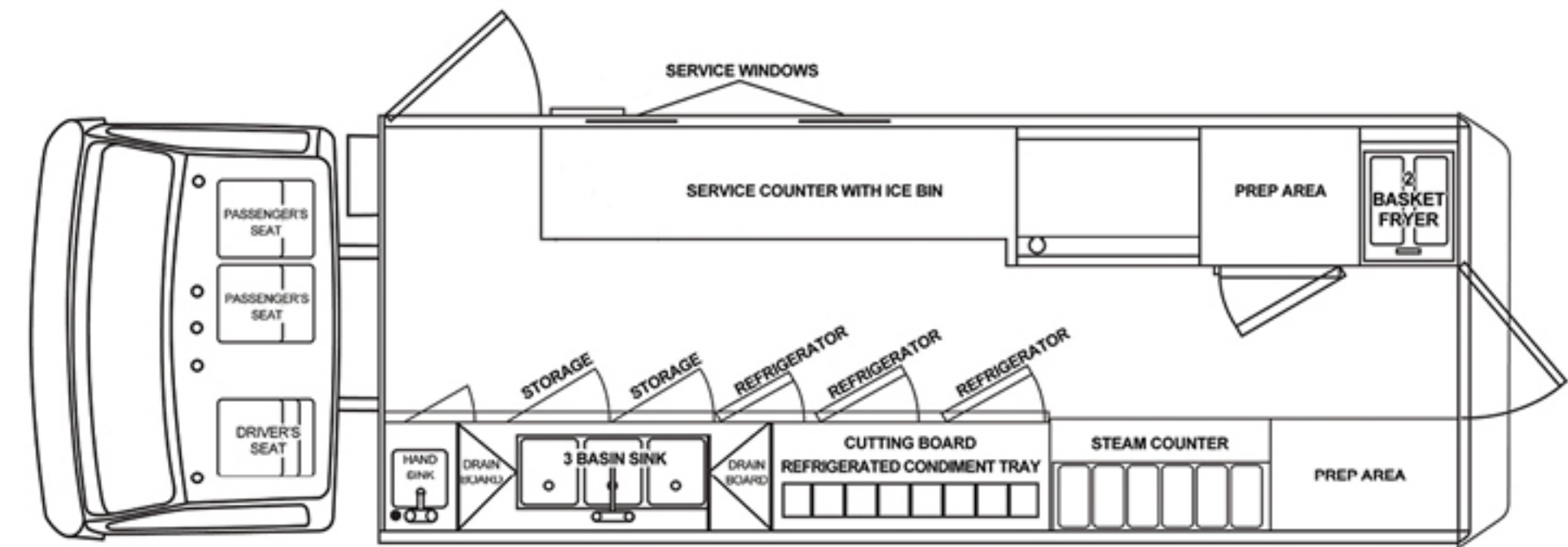
"It's all about fun design and bright colours," says Yen. "It's about trying to make the food truck friendly and

fun and attractive." On her menu there's Peking duck tacos, French fries piled high with 'ju du' pork belly and a steaming plate of swirling linguine that's been doused in curry sauce. These dishes are written in classic script fonts. Yen named her business Phantom to indicate 'we are everywhere' and the overarching motif of her truck is a cartoonish ghostly figure (think of a rather comical bat). The lettering is bold and colourful, the sides of her truck are emblazoned with large photos of the food and their names are punctuated with an exclamation mark.

After all, the design and presentation of a food truck speaks volumes about the people who made it as much as the grub on the menu: nobody is going to line up outside an austere black vehicle with no defining point of view. The Lobos Truck in LA, which serves up barbecued staples, burgers and salads, is painted fire engine red with silhouettes of black flames licking up past the tyres. The Grilled Cheese Truck is, appropriately, a gooey yellow, with a painting on its side of a white truck encased between two huge slices of buttery, cheesy bread. Roy Choi, arguably



## FOOD TRUCKS



An interior plan for a food truck



The design of food trucks has changed over the years but they have always had impact



the 'godfather' of the LA food truck phenomenon with his Kogi BBQ trucks, has rendered them in an instantly identifiable burnished orange. Also, the simplicity of the menu at Son of a Bun, which offers either beef patties, grilled chicken or hot dogs with four possible toppings, a choice of two sides and one dessert, is reflected in its modernistic white vehicle, with silhouettes of a single pig, cow and chicken painted on. One of the most popular trucks roaming the LA streets, Coolhaus, which also sells its frozen treats in gourmet supermarkets, has the most

fitting design: a silvery truck accentuated with pops of hot pink. The menu is suitably eclectic, too. Where else would you find an ice cream named 'brown butter candied bacon' or 'foie gras peanut butter and jelly'?

Despite the teeming number of food trucks now cruising through big city streets (and, increasingly, smaller towns and suburbs) across the globe, the occupation continues to draw a growing number of entrepreneurs. All the food truck wannabe owners need is a good idea, a bit of social media savvy and a reliable, innovatively designed truck.



This dining car looks moveable but is actually a static restaurant

## Hong Kong's moveable feast

As much a part of Hong Kong culture as dim sum, hawker's stalls used to be found on many roadsides in our city from Causeway Bay to Mong Kok. Popular in the 1960's and 70's, the fashioned wooden carts on wheels selling savoury snacks such as egg waffles, curry fish balls and roasted chestnuts, made up Hong Kong's own street food culture. These food trucks of their day, were pushed around by their operators, usually in crowded pedestrian areas, and are now a dwindling sight as the government cracks down on them for environmental and hygiene reasons. Modern food trucks are a way for Hong Kong to bring back this love of mobile food stalls, while also bringing it into the 21st century.

Last year, the Hong Kong government gave the green light to the introduction of food trucks in our city. Following in the footsteps of established cities like Portland, Oregon, in the USA and London in the UK, the flexibility and relative affordability of a food truck is surely a good thing for our city's dining scene. We speak to Kim Yuen, the organiser of Hong Kong's first food truck festival, which was held earlier this year at PMQ, about what makes these meals on wheels so appealing...

### Why do people like food trucks?

Food trucks are a new, fresh idea and they're fast! Hongkongers love their food and food trucks give them a chance to try a variety of different cuisines.

### Are there different kinds of food truck?

There are lots of vehicles used as food trucks. Kia, Fiat and even Mercedes Benz vans have been converted for use. Design-wise, as we've seen overseas, trucks of different food types, like burger trucks, taco trucks and sausage trucks, each have their own style and owners can show their personality through the look of the truck.



### Do they come pre-fitted from a manufacturer or are they custom-built?

Each truck has to be custom-built, based on the food they are planning to sell, but also to the owner's specifications. Trucks selling ice creams need more freezers, while burger trucks need grill pans. With such limited space, it's important to optimise but also to have a sense of individuality. I think we can expect some interesting designs in Hong Kong! Many owners will ask a design firm to come up with the design when they find the right truck.

### What would be your perfect food truck?

Personally, I'd love to create a music bar truck. I'd have it custom-made with a wall of CDs as the backdrop. It would have a DJ booth and would sell cocktails or coffee.

### If there was a permanent space for food trucks in Hong Kong, would you envisage the overall collective as a design statement?

The concept of food trucks is to create something special and unique, so I think the truck's design should express the individualism of the owner.